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### Islam, political Islam, and the state system

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## **Islam, Political Islam, and the State System**

### Abstract

Islam as an all-encompassing universalistic religion has been key to governing communities in the Middle East from its point of inception onward. In the twentieth century, the entrenchment of a modern state system underpinned by a secularist and nationalist ideology in the region has had a profound impact on the relationship between religious and political authority. This period is synonymous with the rise of political Islam (or Islamism) in most countries of the region. As the geopolitical balance in the Middle East changed, different actors put forward competing interpretations of the Islamic doctrine to answer what they considered to be the main challenges of contemporary governance. Domestically and internationally, both at the elites and societal levels, new and old actors invoking Islam as a master frame for transforming society competed with each other and with secularized political actors for the control of the state system. This chapter analyses the transformation of the interactions amongst actors promoting an Islamic agenda in relation to the changing role of the state and the problems (and opportunities) of governance generated by globalization and modernization. It highlights the historicity of the answers provided by each actor, as well as that of the portrayal of the tension between Islam and the state. The analysis underscores the malleability of the debates and practices centring on Islam and politics and teases out the issues and approaches that are most relevant today to grasp the historical trajectories of these interactions in the region.

### Introduction

The account that I present in this chapter focuses primarily on the dynamics of Islam in the social and political sphere shaped by the state. It does not engage directly with issues of

individual faith or spirituality, or with theological debates. When the actors themselves explicitly position their actions in relation to the political field (loosely defined), I will use the terms 'political Islam' and 'Islamism' interchangeably. I define Islamism as the political dynamics created by the activities of people explicitly believing that the Islamic doctrine has something crucial to say about how society should be organized now, and seeking to implement this form of governance as a matter of priority'.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, the impact of Islam on state and society is not always mediated by Islamists but more generally by religious scholars and other pious actors having a concern with personal piety and the observance of religious law. In all cases, the articulation of Islam and Islamism is primarily a social construct representing what such actors in different socio-historical contexts think about the political and the religious, state and society, the individual and the community, and so on.

In this perspective, it is important not to reduce the impact of the Islamic creed on state and society to the views of well-known Islamic political actors, religious scholars or ideologues – be they Khomeini, Al-Bana, Qutb, Abd al-Wahhab, Al-Albani, Al-Qaradawi, and so on. Undoubtedly, these and other important thinkers did shape in an important way the impact of Islam on the state and on politics. Some considerable scholarly effort has been devoted to understanding and explaining the works of key Islamic leaders, especially those whose intellectual influence remains palpable to this day.<sup>2</sup> However, the crucial element to analyse in relation to their ideas is how specific interpretations of the Islamic doctrine managed to remain pertinent for subsequent generations of believers and activists. To understand this process, it is necessary to examine in what circumstances and for what purposes are specific religious scholars and ideologues invoked. It requires investigating which aspects of their teaching is reused or revised by other actors in different places and at different times. Only by contextualizing the trajectories of specific ideas and practices of Islam in relation to politics can the analyst make sense of the contemporary choices and behaviours of a wide variety of groups and individuals claiming to act in the name of Islam.

Like for 'politics', what constitutes 'Islam' cannot be neatly encapsulated in a definition that is readily accepted by all those concerned. The 'fundamentals' of Islam and of politics alike are a contested terrain with ever-shifting boundaries and rules. As constructivists scholars from

Ahmed to Sayyid have illustrated, this is so because the views and processes that are at the heart of Islamic thought and practice are themselves repeatedly re-constructed by individuals, communities and institutions.<sup>3</sup> While Islamic practice, like political practice, is at any one time organized around key norms and rules, these are always reinterpreted and reprioritized to reflect the needs of individuals and communities.<sup>4</sup>

The analysis of the relationship between Islam, political Islam, and the state that follows is articulated into four main steps. First, it introduces some structuring perspectives on Islam and political Islam in relation to the changing political priorities of the nation-state. Second, it explores the recent historical construction and evolution of different approaches to governance inspired by the Islamic creed. This review sets the foundations for the ensuing two-pronged investigation of the relationship between Islamic perspectives and the construction of politics in the domestic and international sphere in the Middle East and North Africa. In the first instance, I examine how actors advocating different models of Islamic governance, from traditional Ulama to Islamist parties, articulated their claims in domestic politics. Then, I consider how such actors, discourses and practices have become an integral part of the international political system. The concluding section points to key characteristics of contemporary interactions between Islam and politics that shape the trajectories of these phenomena in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Representing Islam and political Islam in a world of nation-states

Contemporary debates about Islam and political Islam are grounded on the often-implicit assumption that domestic and international politics are primarily shaped by states. These prevailing perspectives about domestic and international politics reflect a secular and nationalist understanding of societal interactions organized by a system of sovereign nation-states. In both domestic and international affairs, such views help framing the boundaries of the legitimate and illegitimate, the normal and the abnormal, etc. From a nationalist and secular perspective, what needs to be explained in relation to Islam and the state is what makes religious activism fall outside 'normal' political categories and processes. More specifically a

social sciences' approach seeks to explain how the religious dimension of Islamism transform what would be otherwise standard political claim-making processes. Hence, it is now commonplace for policy-makers and policy analysts (and the media) to rank different forms of Islam from 'moderate' to 'radical'.<sup>5</sup> Although such approaches are common, they are only informative in so far as the secular and nationalist assumptions about politics on which they rely are understood and/or relevant.

To talk about Islam and Islamism today is also to talk about the state. Although Islam like other world religions is not state centric, there is much that cannot be understood about contemporary trends without referring to the modern state system. As Piscatori noted, this realization had also become inescapable for most thinkers and activists using an Islamic framework of reference by the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> In practice, a successful religious current hardly ever strives on spirituality and faith alone. It is embedded in a political and military context, it has an economic and social position, and, as Asad illustrated well, it partakes in particular productions of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Understanding the dynamics of Islam and political Islam requires therefore analysing the interactions between these different factors and processes. The politics of the national state are crucial today to define the religious field (regardless of the official position of the state vis-a-vis religion), as state institutions establish the formal boundaries between religious and non-religious issues.<sup>8</sup>

While Islamic actors have always had some input into the politics of states, empires and other political groupings in the Middle East and beyond, political Islam embodies a current that is far more grounded in the politics of the modern nation-state. From the beginning of the twentieth century onward there has been a growing tension between two forms of Islamic influences on the state. On the one hand there has been an upgrading and modernization of the traditional roles of the Ulama, first as 'advisors to the prince' and their modern days equivalent, and second as scholar-jurists in the construction of the postcolonial states legal and constitutional frameworks.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, there has been a process of formal and informal institutionalization of Islamist movements as political actors seeking to govern the Muslim community directly through the institutions of the state. In this perspective, political Islam is

thus a modern phenomenon; a creation of the twentieth century that belongs to the modern era of mass politics.<sup>10</sup> Hence, across the region, the interactions (and confrontations) between established and new religious authorities have had a crucial role in shaping the impact of Islam on the state.

The tension between an Islamic-inspired approach to social and political order and a secularised, positivist approach to the state and the rule of law is itself riddled with tensions between traditional and new interpreters of Islam. At different times throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, this religious competition over authority has shaped not only how Islam was involved in national and regional politics, but also which kind of Islam was prioritized.<sup>11</sup> Within the religious field, the challenge of 'lay' Islamists against more formally trained religious scholars (Ulama) or traditional authorities (like the Sufi orders) in the name of a return to a 'purer' form of Islamic practice was at once conservative and revolutionary. It was a conservative challenge in the sense that it commonly opposed the bargains that established religious actors had struck with the modernizing, secular postcolonial state. It was revolutionary in the sense that it articulated social and political propositions at odds with the previously dominant interpretations and implementations of the Islamic doctrine. Political Islam was also innovative in its organizational model, as illustrated by the growth and spread of mass-based organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) across the region.<sup>12</sup> These new movements commonly became populist organizations that made full use of the opportunities provided by mass education, mass media and mass politics to support their project of governance.

Over the decades, the alliances and the confrontations that repeatedly shaped domestic and international politics in the Middle East and North Africa repeatedly illustrated how *realpolitik* was influenced by this competition inside the religious sphere. The case of Egypt in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Uprisings provides one vivid illustration of these dynamics and strategies at these two levels. Domestically, the salafists organized in the Al-Nour party strategically chose to support the 2013 military coup of General El-Sisi against the elected Muslim Brotherhood-led government to limit the dominance of the MB over the religious domain in Egypt. Internationally, Saudi Arabia also strategically supported the 2013 coup in

order to contain the regional influence of the MB and the challenge that its ideological leadership posed to its state-sponsored, Ulama-led Wahhabi doctrine.<sup>13</sup>

### The postcolonial evolution of Islamic-inspired perspectives on state governance

What was being asked about and expected from Islam in the middle of the twentieth century, during the heydays of the decolonization period, is quite different from the debates of the present day. No doubt these issues will look very different again at the end of the twenty-first century. Some of the early expectations of nationalist state-builders in the region regarding a standard model of secularization and modernization unfolding seamlessly in Muslim societies have been dramatically revised. From the second half of the twentieth century to the present day, one of the key challenges posed by Islam to international politics has been to inscribe the social and political manifestations of this faith into the prevailing secularized narratives of world order. To a significant degree, the contemporary debates about the role of Islam and Islamism in politics are more concerned with integrating these notions into the prevailing Western models of world politics than they are with specifying the rationale of Islamic worldviews and approaches.<sup>14</sup>

The classic secularization model which once assumed that the role of religion in politics would simply fade away with time as societies modernized has been seriously challenged by the direction taken by social change. Until a few decades ago, Islam and political Islam were viewed as a hindrance to the development of Muslim-majority countries that could be overcome through socio-economic advances and education. In this perspective, political analysts were thus primarily concerned with explaining away the vitality of various movements inspired by Islam in different parts of the Muslim world through a combination of socio-economic determinism – i.e. people needed time to get wealthier and better educated – and institutional accounts of the shortcomings of the developmental state.<sup>15</sup> The emphasis was on showing that the language of Islam expressed in a ‘primitive’ idiom basic political concerns that local

populations could not yet express using a modern political vocabulary. However, even though postcolonial states in the region were often deemed to be seriously flawed, it is not until the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran that political Islam was clearly identified as a relevant state actor.

The notion of a secularization process that was meant to be an irreversible worldwide historical transformation proved to be a crude oversimplification of actual social trends.<sup>16</sup> This does not mean that various forms of secularization are not at work in region. Indeed, both at the institutional and societal level the countries of the Middle East have witnessed a secularization of different aspects of life.<sup>17</sup> Yet this process, like the impact of globalization, has been far more complex and differentiated than previously thought. As a result, the adaptation of Islamic thought and practice to these new circumstances has produced a fine-grained set of social and political responses and positions reflecting the different circumstances encountered by different actors and movements over time.<sup>18</sup>

The very emergence and development of Islamist movements as a specific response to the secularized models of state and politics promoted by colonial power in the first half of the twentieth century constituted one Islamic reply to these challenges. The type of social and political organization developed by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt from the end of the 1920s onward represented one possible avenue for an Islamic-inspired reformulation of politics in the age of mass-based political movements.<sup>19</sup> The relevance of this type of answers that will become generally known as Islamism or political Islam soon became evident to many actors in the region. As the MB model spread out to other countries, it gave rise to similar movements, each adapted to their specific national political context.<sup>20</sup> A few decades later, the promotion of a socially ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam constituted another type of answers to the challenges of secularization and modernization. The regional and global rise of Wahhabism from the 1970s onward illustrated this alternative, Ulama-led trend supported by the financial resources of the petro-monarchies of the Gulf. From the 1990s onward, the entrenchment of a violent transnational jihadi current that started with al-Qaeda's operations in Afghanistan, could also be seen as yet another response to evolving global socio-economic and political challenges, this time using Islamic resources as a tool for structuring a new model of armed



resistance against the dominant national, regional and international actors of the day.<sup>21</sup>

These mobilizations are at once specific replies to the historical circumstances of their time, and a component of subsequent efforts at re-mobilizing Islamic resources. Whilst all these responses are not compatible with each other, and indeed at times are even directly in opposition to one another, they all contribute to shaping the options available to new generations of religious and political actors.<sup>22</sup> Beyond the specific answers that each movement or current provides – say on the shape and function of an Islamic state – they structure the general debate about what Islam should do in politics. Each time, these attempts at harnessing and deploying Islamic resources contributed to a greater acknowledgement among both Muslims and non-Muslims that Islam retained a non-negligible capacity of political mobilization in the region (and beyond).<sup>23</sup>

Contemporary debates about the position of a politically active global religion in a world of nation-states illustrate that such dilemmas are themselves to a large degree the outcome of the expansion of a western model of state in the region. Local resistance to these new types of governance invoked the Islamic repertoire to construct alternative models of allegiance. Although many if not most Islamist movements have advocated or at the very least envisioned a systematic transformation of state and society, in practice they have mainly implemented a piecemeal approach to societal change. The regional and global impact of Islamic-inspired actors can thus be viewed as the incremental accumulation of strategies and interactions that consolidated or challenged the established social and political order at different points in time. Looking at the trajectory of these cumulated changes in recent decades, the implications of Islam and political Islam for state governance in the Middle East and North Africa repeatedly revolved around two axes: domestic and international politics.

The first axis centres on the domestic construction of a concrete system of Islamic governance – a debate which initially focused on the notion of an Islamic state before moving toward that of Muslim democracy. The second axis involves the transnational and/or international strategies and tactics of Islamist movements and would-be Islamic regimes. The relative importance given to each part of the debate generally is an outcome of the wider international context. In the

1990s for example, in the aftermath of the collapse of the communist bloc, domestic issues and the democratization of the regimes of the region were commonly prioritized. In the 2000s, during the 'war on terror' international security aspects became a main focus for politics across the region. In the 2010s, whilst the issue of democratization came back centre-stage during the 2011 Arab uprisings, the second half of the decade was again dominated by international and civil conflict due to the activities of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the regional power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

### Domestic perspectives on governance

Regarding national politics and state governance, a basic distinction can be readily made between the more traditional approaches to Islamic governance embodied in the role of the Ulama as the 'advisor to the prince', and the Islamist approaches that became ever more prominent throughout the twentieth century in which Islamist movements proposed to rule directly. Throughout the colonial and post-colonial period, traditional religious authorities tried to retain as much religious oversight as possible over the state dealings with the population by reaching agreements with the powers-that-be. Their influence was therefore very much dependent upon the type of political system in place and the role that religion was meant to play in legitimizing the regime. Hence, in the postcolonial period, the importance of the Ulama in the neo-traditional Gulf monarchies was greater than in the 'modern' Arab Republics of Egypt, Iraq, Syria or Libya.

Islamists movements by contrast generally gained momentum and popular support by putting forward social and political projects that stood in opposition to the views of the ruling elites of the day. The nature of this opposition varied over time depending on the type of state rule and the political response of the regime. At times these movements were primarily facing repression; at other times the state authorities made some concessions to manage more efficiently the constituencies that the Islamists were able to mobilize. Up to this day, this balance between repression and co-optation varies from countries to countries and over time.

For all the intensity of Islamist activism in the region from the 1970s onward, it is noticeable

that these movements hardly ever succeeded in actually implementing their preferred system of governance. Roy already suggested a generalized failure of political Islam in the early 1990s.<sup>24</sup> By this, he meant primarily the failure of a revolutionist brand of militant Islam that sought to access state power by force. Although the Iranian context provided a rare opportunity for militant Islam to implement the revolutionary Islamic system of governance favoured by some actors, the failure of direct action elsewhere in the region (Egypt, Syria, Algeria, and so on) did not mean that Islamism could not shape national politics.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, what became noticeable from at least the 1980s onward was the slow but progressive Islamization of many aspects of social and political life through a process of internal reconfiguration of nationalist regimes in the region (and beyond).<sup>26</sup>

Islamic governance was hardly a concrete political issue for most nationalist regimes at the time of independence. Secularized state actors could see the benefits of using Islamic rhetoric to legitimize their rule, but they usually did not seriously consider the institutional implications of these views. It became a very specific set of political concern a few decades later, however, as Islamist movements became increasingly effective at turning these issues into an effective tool of social mobilization. Their success was due at least in part to the repeated failures of postcolonial regimes at socio-economic development. The scholarship on the region noted at length how the progressive weakening of the welfare state from the 1980s onward not only gave the Islamist opposition ideological ammunitions but it also made their charitable activities a model of effective social activism.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, a very significant characteristic of the inroads made by Islamist movements into national politics was that their advocacy of a more Islamic rule at the time increasingly coincided with their ideological acceptance of a sovereign state constructed on electoral democracy.

In a global context increasingly permeated by democratizing discourses, one of the main conceptual dilemmas for Islamist parties is the accommodation of a democratic concept of 'sovereignty of the people' with the Islamic notion of 'sovereignty of God'. In the social sciences, orientalist-inspired analyses took one horn of the dilemma and argued that no Islamic system could ever be truly democratic since the sovereignty of God ultimately trumped the popular legitimacy of a democratic political system. Post-orientalist views, by contrast, stressed

that since the Scriptures were not very specific regarding legitimate political structures, disagreements regarding their compatibility with God's sovereignty were just a matter of diverging interpretations between religious leaders (and between them and the public).<sup>28</sup> Over time, Islamic scholars and Islamist ideologues somewhat duplicated these social sciences approaches using insights from their own tradition.

In recent decades the sovereignty debate inside Islamists movements has passed through three stages. In the first instance, in the aftermath of the decolonisation process, as post-colonial states were trying to entrench their rule in an authoritarian-populist fashion, Islamists put forward a rather sceptical if not straightforwardly inimical views of all secular models of state governance. Up to the 1970s Islamic debates over governance were overshadowed by the issue of the formation of an Islamic state which alone could implement a properly Islamic form of sovereignty. Inspired by thinkers like Mawdudi and Qutb this model of governance was deemed the most appropriate to ensure that state policies and laws were a genuine reflection of the Islamic doctrine. From the 1980s onward, the 'compatibility with democracy' argument became increasingly dominant in these debates.<sup>29</sup> In this perspective, the kind of popular sovereignty represented in liberal democracies was deemed to be compatible with a modernist interpretation of the Islamic doctrine. Democratic political institutions were thus presented as an adequate vehicle for the Islamic message by making parallels between this contemporary model and early Islamic practices such as *shura* (consultation). In the 2000s, the success of the Justice and Development party (AKP) in Turkey was seen as a working illustration of this approach; as was that of Ennahda in Tunisia in the 2010s.<sup>30</sup> The third debate that took off in the 2000s but that still remains relatively marginal in political term bypassed the quest to demonstrate compatibility between Islamic and liberal doctrines and sought to build an Islamic inspired model of governance on universalist principles shared by Islam and liberalism.<sup>31</sup>

The debates taking place within Islamist movements, as well as the evolving influence of the Ulama on rulers in the region are not synchronized with the strategies of state actors. It is at the beginning of the 2000s, when the debate about domestic Islamic governance was most intense and most relevant to the democratization process that the actions of a particular subset of non-state actors advocating a globalized armed struggle (and the response of

international state actors to this agenda) reoriented the debate and the options available towards a securitization process. The 'war on terror' led by the United States against Al-Qaeda after the attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11) seriously constrained the opportunities for a normalization of Islamism in a liberalized domestic political sphere in the region. Whereas the scholarship on the region had seriously considered the likelihood of a process of integration of mainstream Islamist parties in national politics, not least through the lenses of the inclusion-moderation thesis, the sudden 'hardening' of the regimes after 9/11 put this scenario on hold.<sup>32</sup>

The focus on democratic Islamic governance came back to the fore at the beginning of the 2010s notably due to the 2011 Arab uprisings. As mobilization around Islamic themes was not one of the main drivers of these uprisings in most cases, Islamist actors had to adapt more pragmatically their approaches to the type of political opening that was made available then.<sup>33</sup> In countries where the uprisings defeated or significantly weakened the authoritarian regime in place, this situation facilitated the implementation of a model of political liberalization supported my mainstream Islamists movements organized as political parties (Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen). Although these democratic transitions subsequently failed to become entrenched in many countries due to a combination of internal and external pressures, they nonetheless provided practical information regarding how democratic national political institutions could function under the leadership of Islamist parties.

From an institutional perspective, the difficulties created by political Islam for democratization commonly have to do with ensuring that in the early stages of open political competition, Islamists who marginally subscribe to the idea of democracy do not take advantage of the new multiparty system to change the 'rules of the game'. The main fears are that Islamists could 'hijack' the democratization process – the so-called Islamist free elections trap – and/or produce an illiberal majoritarian democracy.<sup>34</sup> Today, these dilemmas can best be addressed by making two types of rather distinct observations. On the one hand, the secularized or neo-traditionalist regimes in the region that refrained from making significant democratic political reforms in order to 'save' their country from the 'Islamist threat' commonly entrenched instead their own brand of authoritarian governance – viz. Egypt after the 2013 coup by General El-Sisi for a recent illustration of this trend. On the other hand, Islamists movements and parties have

over the years revised their discourse and practices to make them routinely congruent with the rules of electoral democracy (if not fully liberal democracy), up to the point where their members discursively and practically follow these rules.<sup>35</sup> The case of the AKP in Turkey in the 2010s also illustrated that when they did slide back toward more authoritarian views and behaviours, this was not due primarily to the replacement of a democratic approach to politics by a religious one, but to an all too common illiberal and autocratic drift by the incumbent political elites (and their followers).

### International relations and strategies

On the international and regional scene, Islam and Islamism hardly featured prominently at the time of independence, when the region was the site of competition between the two superpowers of the day (USA and USSR). The specifically Muslim character of these societies was deemed to be marginal at most for regional alliances and foreign policy. Indeed, in line with secularization theory, the relevance of religion was expected to decline with time in the region, as people aligned their views with the dominant ideologies of the day. At most, the presence of Islamic discourses was seen to be the expression of conservative forces trying to maintain their position in society. This observation made in connection to the neo-traditional monarchies of the Gulf could nonetheless be very relevant for international players keen to maintain the stability of these regimes as part of their global system of alliances.<sup>36</sup>

The ambiguity of international actors vis-à-vis Islamic identity markers still remained tangible in the 1980s even after the Islamic revolution in Iran. The revolutionary model of Shia Islamic governance proposed by Ayatollah Khomeini was clearly seen as a threat to Western interests in the region due to the anti-system ideology and aggressive foreign policy promoted by Iran at the time. Unsurprisingly, Western governments sought to weaken and isolate the Islamic Republic, notably via their support for the authoritarian secular regime of Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). Yet, if the brand of revolutionary Shia Islam underpinning the regional strategy of Iran was recognised as a problem for the Middle East, other forms of Islamic activism were harnessed at the same time in support of Western strategic interests.

During the Soviet-Afghan conflict (1979-89), The US government was keen to enlist Saudi Arabia to support financially the Islamic-framed Mujahideen resistance movement in Afghanistan. A side effect of this regional support for the Mujahideen's struggle, portrayed as an Islamic resistance to an imperialist aggression on Muslim lands, was the growth of a transnational network of volunteers for the jihad in Afghanistan structured notably by the Al-Qaeda organization.<sup>37</sup>

International recognition of the brand of global jihadism spearheaded by al Qaeda as a defining characteristic of the region would come about progressively in the 1990s, notably as the collapse of the Soviet Union changed global geopolitical calculations. In the Middle East, the Western military intervention during the first Gulf War (1990-91) against the Iraqi regime also contributed to entrench the idea of transnational armed resistance framed in Islamic terms in opposition to foreign meddling in the region. The growing relevance of armed Islamist movements during that decade began to make this model of activism a main element of foreign policy making.<sup>38</sup> As the perception of a jihadi current dominated by uncontrollable outbursts of violence against ill-defined 'enemies of Islam' at home and abroad gained prominence in Western foreign-policy circles in the 1990s, these violent transnational actors also began to shape more decisively the debate about political Islam within their own tradition. In the social sciences, as well as in policy and media discourse this led to the re-emergence of a narrative about an Islamic civilization which recycled old negative orientalist stereotypes about the region.<sup>39</sup> These perspectives became all too common one after the Al Qaeda attacks in the United States on 9/11.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the decade that followed 9/11 was primarily shaped by the policies and strategies of the 'war on terror' orchestrated by the US administration under G.W. Bush. Among its many implications for the region, and notably as a result of the US-led 2003 military intervention in Iraq, were two important sets of consequences for the articulation of Islamic identity and practice. First, for mass-based Islamist movements and parties, this new international environment led them to position themselves explicitly on issues which had remained debated until then. The positioning of most Islamist movement against the transnational militancy advocated by al-Qaeda was generally accompanied by an explicit

endorsement of democratic processes in national politics as the main alternative. Even though the 2000s were generally characterized across the region by a clampdown by authoritarian regimes on mainstream Islamists movements in the name of 'security', this period also enabled these movements to solidify their ideological orientation in favour of electoral democracy and in opposition to transnational violence.<sup>40</sup> Second, traditional Islamic authorities were also impacted by the dynamics of the 'war on terror'. As international actors and regimes in the region sought to counter the appeal of global jihadism they endeavoured to empower alternative Islamic voices, be they Sufi movements, local religious authorities deemed to be 'moderate', or socially conservative actors (including various brand of scientific Salafism) shunning a political agenda.<sup>41</sup> In this way, the global fight against transnational jihadism also contributed to entrench the relevance of Islamic markers for doing politics in the region.

Until 9/11 the choices of the regimes of the Middle East and North Africa were deemed to be influenced at the margin by Islamic culture. In the post-9/11 context, western governments had to revise some of their assumptions regarding how far national elites in the region could actually control Islamic activism via the institutions of the state. The issue of a lack a cohesive centre of Islamic authority for structuring the processes of late twentieth century globalization of Islamic activism and discourse was central to this predicament. As Mandaville noted, this problem was made even more complex by the longer-term processes of democratization of Islamic knowledge and authority which contributed to the growing the growing strategic importance of the Muslim 'periphery' (be it in Muslim minority settings or in peripheral Muslim majority countries).<sup>42</sup> Transnationally, if different types of Islamic organizations contributed to the formation of basic consensuses across this global ummah about the ideas and practices that were central to contemporary Islam, they did not define a clear and authoritative overall position. Divergences regarding the practical implementation of general principles remained plentiful, not least regarding the legitimate use of violence.

At the international level, policy makers have been mostly concerned with the apparent growing appeal of Islamist discourses justifying violence against a wide range of targets declared apostate – a trend within jihadism commonly referred to as *takfiri*. Yet, the transformation of the discourse and practices of jihadism as armed militancy is also to be seen



against the background of changing global practices of warfare and securitization during the 'war on terror'.<sup>43</sup> Actors invoking the Islamic doctrine articulate their discourses and practices onto the pre-existing 'rules of the game' usually imposed in the region by authoritarian regimes and recurrent foreign interventions.<sup>44</sup> The anti-western rhetoric that commonly characterises this violent militancy is grounded in the assessment that international actors are supporting local authoritarian regimes, and that they encourage and help them repress activism connected to Islam. From a militant's perspective, such evaluations repeatedly inform a tactical change of focus from the 'near enemy' (the domestic elites) to the 'far enemy' (the foreign powers supporting them).<sup>45</sup>

Since 9/11 it has been common for part of the security literature to explore the specific role played by a religious ideology and socialization process for a specific type of transnational violent militancy.<sup>46</sup> However, such considerations can only constitute a side argument in a comprehensive account of the diffusion of a militaristic notion of 'jihad' centring on the dynamics of globalization of conflicts as the core explanatory variable.<sup>47</sup> While the size of a violent global jihadi community has grown over the last few decades, it remains doubtful how far this constituency can be viable when disconnected from concrete national-based conflicts, as the collapse of the ISIS networks in the late 2010s illustrate.

## Conclusion

The relationship between Islam and the state in the Middle East and North Africa hardly ever involves a fixed and well-defined set of discourses and practices. Instead it is an open-ended, ongoing debate about the meaning of Islamic religiosity for individuals and communities, and about its political implications for institutionalized governance. It would be misguided to assume that a generic concern with reviving the 'fundamentals' of Islam strictly constrains what actors inspired by the Islamic creed could do in a modernizing (or postmodern) societal order and international system. New and old Islamic actors are continuously repositioning themselves – tactically, strategically, and substantively – vis-a-vis other ideas and practices in the political and religious fields. There is a never-ending re-examination of what it means to follow the

‘fundamentals’ of Islam; even when actors claim that the text speaks for itself or that no new interpretation is needed anymore. In its turn this process generates a repeated re-articulation of what Islam means for and demands of the state.

Within this general context, however, it is important to note that there are identifiable historical trends in the region at both domestic and international levels. Over time, Islamic actors primarily concerned with the re-Islamization of the masses have had a better opportunity to grow in strength in national politics. From a bottom-up perspective, the success of specific discourses and practices has been tied to the ability of these movements to produce meaningful articulations between the social and the political in different historical conjunctures. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the combination of political democratization and economic liberalization has increasingly given more weight to actors organized as Islamist parties. This particular evolution illustrates the possibility of a routine Islamic input into politics that reflects the popular appeal of Islamic-oriented discourses but does not imply a complete takeover of the apparatus of the secular state. In the contemporary regional context, it is nonetheless too early to say whether this situation will facilitate the establishment of a more consensual religious practice with more representative Islamic ‘authorities’ and more inclusive (internal and external) decision-making processes. What is clearer, however, is that the opposite outcomes are to be expected when mainstream Islamist parties are driven underground by authoritarian state elites.

On the international stage, the regional tensions created by competition between states meant that those Islamic actors with large domestic constituencies did not necessarily gained the upper hand in terms of regional diffusions of religious ideas and practices. The tactical advantage that transnational jihadi movements have had in the last few decades was that they could claim to articulate the views and demands of a global Muslim constituency in a way that most national-based Islamist organizations could not. Furthermore, they could also argue that to overcome the status quo imposed by authoritarian regimes and foreign powers, violence was required to make state actors pay attention to this Islamic constituency. What has become clear over time is that this type of militancy has not been a very effective means to answer the needs and aspirations of any global or regional Muslim community. However, despite a lack of

active mass support, the al-Qaeda and ISIS phenomena (and their likely successors) will continue to represent for some activists an appropriate answer to the circumstances of their time.

In the medium term, violent transnational militancy will continue to benefit from the interventions of external players in the Middle East and North Africa as much as from the regional conflicts between and in the states of the region. This will remain the case even when specific jihadi organizations are destroyed in the process, as the very tools used to bring them down are the cause of the continuing appeal of this violent militancy model. These dynamics of conflict enable jihadi actors to shape the debates about Islam and political Islam to a far larger extent than their social, political and religious weight would otherwise allow them to do. In this context too, Islamic-inspired discourses and practices that have an over-bearing influence on the contemporary political debates are the ones addressing directly the core functions of the state, namely institutionalized national politics with the Islamist parties, and security and defence with the transnational jihadi networks.

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- <sup>4</sup> In relation to civil society and the common good, see, Armando Salvatore and Dale F. Eickelman (Eds.), *Public Islam and the Common Good*. Leiden: Brill, 2004.

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<sup>15</sup> For an early critical assessment of these perspectives see, Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East*. London: Routledge, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> Even the initial proponents of the argument eventually recognised its limitations. See Peter L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Eerdmans Publishing. 1999

<sup>17</sup> See, John L. Esposito and Francois Burgat (Eds.). *Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in Europe and the Middle East*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> See in relation to the inclusion of not specifically Islamic local concerns and views, Dale F. Eickelman and James P. Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004

<sup>19</sup> Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood*; *Mobilizing Islam*; Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*.

<sup>20</sup> Beverley Milton-Edwards, *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Arab Spring and Its Future Face*. New York: Routledge, 2015

<sup>21</sup> See Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, trans. A. Roberts. London: I B Tauris, 2002

<sup>22</sup> In relation to the transmission of different views via different forms of Islamic schooling see the contributors to, Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Eds.), *Schooling Islam*:



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<sup>23</sup> For an illustration of different bottom up processes of mobilization see the contributors to Quintan Wiktorowicz, (Ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004

<sup>24</sup> Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*. Tr. C. Volk. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996

<sup>25</sup> Although it represents a Twelver Shia's perspective, Khomeini's blueprint for the Islamic Republic of Iran has more affinities with the Islamist approach to politics in Sunni Islam than with the traditional Ulama oversight of the state rulers, even if the role of the Shia clergy is also buttressed in Khomeini's model of governance. See Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

<sup>26</sup> Francois Burgat, *Islamism in the Shadow of al-Qaeda*, trans. P. Hutchinson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008

<sup>27</sup> See Janine Clark, *Islam, Charity and Activism: Middle-Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004; Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam*. For a critical consideration of their actual economic positioning see, Charles Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> For a sharp and critical early summary see Yahya Sadowski, 'The New Orientalism and the Democracy Debate', *Middle East Report* No. 183, 1993, pp. 14-21. For a subsequent reflection on the theme see Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*. Stanford University Press, 2007

<sup>29</sup> For an illustration of this changing emphasis at the time see the contributors to John L. Esposito (Ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983

<sup>30</sup> See M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003; Jenny White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002

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<sup>36</sup> In relation to the competition with Shia Islam see, Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. London: Hurst Publishers, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Regarding the Saudi dimension of this militancy, see Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010

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<sup>38</sup> From a European perspective in relation to Algeria see, Frederic Volpi, *Islam and Democracy: The Failure of Dialogue in Algeria*. London: Pluto Press, 2003.

<sup>39</sup> For critical assessments, see Fawaz A. Gerges, *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures Or Clash of Interests?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East*. London: I.B.Tauris, 1996.

<sup>40</sup> This evolution has been identified by some scholars as a post-Islamist trend. See for example Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007

<sup>41</sup> See for example Joas Wagemakers, *Salafism in Jordan: Political Islam in a Quietist Community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. For the multiple expressions of salafism see the contributors to Roel Meijer (Ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*. London: Hurst, 2009

<sup>42</sup> See Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam*. New York: Routledge, 2007; *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma*. New York: Routledge 2003.

<sup>43</sup> See Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State*, Tr. C. Schoch. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017

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<sup>45</sup> See Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

<sup>46</sup> See for example Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004

<sup>47</sup> In the context of the recent revival of sectarianism in the Middle East as the result of the Syrian conflict and the regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, see the contributors to Frederic Wehrey (Ed.), *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017